



# **Listening for the Wind**

**Sam Ragan**



# **Listening for the Wind**

## ***Notes***

The poem entitled "A Book" was written in celebration of National Library Week.

"We Build" was adopted as the official poem of the Kiwanis Club of the Sandhills, the Carolinas, and by Kiwanis International.

"Salute to St. Andrews" was written for and read at the inauguration of Dr. Warren Board as the fifth president of St. Andrews Presbyterian College on October 1, 1994.

Copyright 1995 by Sam Ragan

Printed by Atwood Printing Co, Inc.  
in Asheville, North Carolina

For St. Andrews College Press  
1700 Dogwood Mile  
Laurinburg, NC 28352

Cover Design by Nancy Smith  
Back Cover Photo by Mae Woods Bell

ISBN: 1-879934-46-9

First Printing: December 1995

# **Listening for the Wind**

**Poems by Sam Ragan**

**Edited by Ronald H. Bayes**

**St. Andrews College Press  
Laurinburg, NC  
1995**



## ***Foreword***

When *The Tree in the Far Pasture* was published in 1964, it was pleasing that this first published collection of my poems got favorable reviews in all parts of the country.

A woman in California wrote about the music she found in the poems. A critic in Boston talked about movement as in the dance; and another in the Midwest compared the poems to the paintings of Edward Hopper.

Critics often make comparisons, and my poems were compared to the first and second century Chinese all the way up to the late 20th century and such splendid poets as Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens. I liked best, however, what Thad Stem wrote in a review. "Sam Ragan," he said, "is like Sam Ragan."

After a lifetime of reading great poetry I had concluded that a good poem was the embodiment of all the arts, and indeed I had experienced the physical sensations which Marianne Moore had written about in the reading of poetry as causing the hair to rise and the eyes to dilate.

I seek clarity and conciseness in my poems, and often the writing takes on the characteristics of the search for the Holy Grail. The search never ends but the pursuit goes on. Often a poet can say in twenty lines what it takes a novelist a hundred thousand words to say.

There are no such claims in the poems collected here under the title of *Listening for the Wind*. These are frequently short poems which look at the human condition, at people and the world around them, and seek to preserve those glances and the moments in time experienced by human beings.

These are not earth-shaking or historically significant events, but I hope their preservation will provide some insights, perhaps a laugh or appreciative look, and enjoyment.

That, I think, is what poetry is all about.

Sam Ragan  
Southern Pines, NC

## ***Table of Contents***

### Part One: The word catches and holds the world

A Book.....	3
Words.....	4
The Man Who Wrote a Book.....	5
What She Said.....	6
Marilyn's Poems.....	7
O. Henry--Going Home.....	8
What She Wants.....	9
Gold and Iron.....	10
Ice Cream.....	11
The Teller of Tales.....	12
I Saw God.....	13
The Pines.....	14
Two Butterflies.....	15
Remembering the Sun.....	16
First Light.....	17
The Human Heart.....	18
Sundial in the Shade.....	19
What the Governor of North Carolina Really Said.....	20
to the Governor of South Carolina	

### Part Two: It should be preserved

Preservation.....	23
For Marjorie: .....	24
( <i>March 31, 1992</i> )	
To Marjorie:.....	25
( <i>March 31, 1991</i> )	
Your Return.....	26
The Maker of Hats.....	27
The Stepped on Crocus.....	28



Sunrise.....	29
Ghost Pines.....	30
Winter Lightning.....	31
Sober and Wise.....	32
Old Poems.....	33
The Baptizing.....	34
The Parting.....	35
The Horizon Look.....	36

### Part Three: I never saw it that way before

Thad Stem and Words.....	39
Guy Owen's Windshield Wiper.....	40
The Kudzu Man.....	41
Talmadge.....	42
The Depression.....	43
The Patriot.....	44
For Margaret.....	45
Policy.....	46
The Pocketbook Hater.....	47
Poetry Reading.....	48
We Build.....	49
Salute to St. Andrews.....	50



*To Marjorie, who shared the journey,  
and Nancy, Talmadge, Robin, and Eric,  
who joined us along the way*



*Part One:*  
*The word catches and holds the world.*



## ***A Book***

Out of the darkness  
A single light--  
A boy and a book  
By light of a lamp, and then  
The arc of a larger light.

It all begins with a word,  
And the world,  
The green and growing world  
Races before the word,  
And the word catches, and holds  
The world.

He remembers and tells  
The children the wise advice:  
"You don't have to plug it in,  
And it doesn't need batteries."

## ***Words***

It begins with the word,  
With word following word  
Music is made  
Words make music all their own,  
And sometimes there is nothing  
More beautiful than words  
Marching down a page,  
...Words marching

Sometimes they dance.



## ***The Man Who Wrote a Book***

Paul Green said that when  
he left a Harnett County farm  
For Chapel Hill he had never met  
A man who had written a book.  
At the University there was one man  
With that distinction, he said,  
And they used to point him out to visitors,  
Just like a tourist attraction.

## ***What She Said***

O'Connor was talking  
About William Faulkner.

"When the big train's coming," she said,  
"You'd better get your mule and wagon  
Off the track."

## ***Marilyn's Poems***

Marilyn Monroe wrote poems  
And sent them to Carl Sandburg.  
That's all we know  
About this poignant legend.  
That's all we know,  
But it's enough.

## ***O. Henry--Going Home***

Did he really say it--  
As they said he did--  
There in that darkened room:  
'Turn up the light,  
I don't want to go home in the dark? '  
The hard-drinking William Sydney Porter  
(He called himself O. Henry) was nearing  
The end of his story-telling.  
He would soon be back in North Carolina,  
And that popular tune of the time  
Was ringing in his ears--  
"I don't want to go home in the dark."

## ***What She Wants***

All the women laughed  
when she said it.  
The men had puzzled expressions  
When they looked at each other.  
I'm going to read a poem,  
She said, about a man  
Who thinks he knows  
What a woman really wants.

## ***Gold and Iron***

You were four and you remember  
The boy who stood on his porch  
Across the street in the small  
    coastal town,  
Rocking from side to side  
And saying over and over  
All the day long:  
'Gold and Iron,  
Gold and Iron,  
Gold and Iron. '  
That was all.  
What did it mean to you?  
What did it mean to him?

## ***Ice Cream***

Eating ice cream, my father said,  
Is like lying down  
And letting the moon  
Shine in your mouth.

## *The Teller of Tales*

He wore his white linens on Sundays,  
My ice cream suit, he called it.  
On the front porch Sunday afternoons  
He would take off his jacket and tie  
And bring out his mandolin,  
Which he would play when feeling good.  
Afterwards there would be stories  
That searched out his past,  
A puzzled telling and a seeking  
For meaning which no one ever had.  
They were good stories out of his life.  
He enjoyed telling them,  
We enjoyed listening.



## *I Saw God*

At the old Star-News building  
People could walk in off the street.  
They often did late at night,  
And this man walked in and said,  
"I just saw God."  
He looked around the newsroom,  
And saw I was alone.  
I didn't say anything.  
"He was standing right there,  
Looking in the window of Belk-Williams...  
Just like you and me."  
The man pointed a finger at me--  
"Write it down," he said.  
"I saw God."

## ***The Pines***

The tall slender pines  
Keep reaching for the sky.  
Even in moonlight  
They cast long shadows,  
The wind only sways them.  
I walk on the needled softness,  
I listen for the murmur  
Of the wind.

## *Two Butterflies*

I keep thinking of that butterfly  
I saw skimming the waves  
In the Pacific more than 200 miles from any land,  
More than 45 years ago.  
He or she was large, bright blue, and  
                    beautiful. I keep remembering  
How beautiful she looked in the sunlight.

A few days ago another butterfly  
Kept returning to the same place  
On the large windowpane,  
fluttering its large yellow wings,  
Bright in the sunlight.

I think of these two butterflies--  
So long ago, so far apart,  
Their lives so short--  
Who live only to be beautiful--  
Isn't that enough?

## ***Remembering the Sun***

That summer the sun  
Played in and out with the clouds.  
There was not much rain  
But the clouds kept coming.  
At night there was thunder,  
But the rains passed by.  
We touched hands  
To remember the sun.

## ***First Light***

He was up by first light.  
He bragged about it,  
It meant something to him  
To see the sun come up.  
There were things to do, he said.  
On a farm there are always  
Things to do, but even if he did  
Get up, at first light  
He didn't seem to do  
Any more than anyone else.

## ***The Human Heart***

He spoke for himself,  
But William Faulkner spoke  
For all writers when he said  
That, deep down, they wrote  
About the same thing.  
That thing, he said, is  
The human heart in conflict  
With itself.

### *Sundial in the Shade*

They had been gifts  
And were proudly displayed.  
But the chimes were hung  
Where the wind didn't blow,  
And the sundial was in the shade.

## ***What the Governor of North Carolina Really Said to the Governor of South Carolina***

Strom Thurmond, the Governor of South  
Carolina, is speaking

To Gregg Cherry, the Governor of North Carolina:

"Governor," Thurmond says, "I don't think  
you like me very much."

Cherry's studied reply is, "I like you all  
right, Strom,

But I'm no damn fool about you."



*Part Two:*  
*It should be preserved.*



## ***Preservation***

In this September sky  
There are silences, and only  
A thin sliver of moon lights the dark.  
Even the wind is stilled,  
And no sound comes from the pines.  
This is not a major moment  
Of great events or portents  
But, somehow, sitting here  
In the darkness, I have the feeling  
It should be preserved.

## ***Your Return***

When you are away  
I listen for your return.  
I feel your touch and I see  
Laughter enter your eyes,  
And the quiet of your sleeping face.  
All my senses are in tune  
With you.  
Even the apple blossoms  
Bear your name

## ***The Maker of Hats***

These hats are my poems, she said.  
I even give them names--  
Each one is different, and they say  
Different things to me, and I hope  
They say different things to other people.  
Take this one, for example,  
I call it simply, "Azure is."

## *The Stepped-On Crocus*

The crocus had been stepped on,  
But it was still golden  
In the early morning sun  
Of a cold February day.  
The blossom had suddenly appeared  
To brighten our eyes.  
We knew it would not last,  
But you did call it  
The first sign of spring.

## *Sunrise*

Out of his window  
He saw the sun come up.  
The sky had been red the night before,  
Today was clear and cold.  
He shivered in his warm room.  
Somehow it was different  
Than he had remembered  
It to be.

## ***Ghost Pines***

Two longleaf pines tower  
Above all the rest in the woods.  
They are ghost pines really--  
Simply reflections by the sun  
From the large windows,  
But I am sure they reflect  
The giant pines that long ago  
Towered over the South,  
And now are almost gone,  
Still hovering like ghosts  
Over the trees left behind.



## ***Winter Lightning***

It was into the third day  
Of winter, the last of December,  
I was awakened by the rumble  
Of thunder, the wind rising,  
And a cramp in my leg.  
I sat in a darkened room  
And rubbed away the cramp  
While watching the lightning  
Flash across the skies  
Before the rains came.  
I thought about last summer  
When the storm was much the same  
But the rain was longer  
Than it is now,  
With the lightning lighting up  
The entire room, brighter than then.

## *Sober and Wise*

I never really knew  
If the old man  
Was making excuses,  
Showing tolerance for a weakness,  
Or making a statement,  
But on occasions he would say:  
A drunk man can become sober,  
But a damn fool  
Will never be wise.

## ***Old Poems***

All night I have listened  
To the wind and the rain,  
Sometimes coming down hard,  
Sometimes softened by a rare  
    quietness  
That comes past midnight,  
As I seek sleep by quoting  
Over and over old and favorite  
    poems.  
Sleep finally comes, and  
The wind and the rain are gone.  
I wake in the dark  
    before dawn  
Still remembering the lines  
From old poems.

## *The Baptizing*

The water was muddy;  
Their dress was white  
When they went under.  
"I saw Jesus," one shouted  
As she came up.  
An old man on the creek bank  
Was muttering to himself,  
"I don't believe she could see much  
In all that damn muddy water."

## ***The Parting***

They had come  
To a parting of the ways,  
And she loudly  
Told him why:  
"Your feet stink,  
And you don't love your Jesus."

## ***The Horizon Look***

He was talking about a woman  
He had known for several years:  
She never sees anyone  
When she enters a room;  
In the room she still  
Doesn't really see anyone--  
She's always got  
That horizon look.

***Part Three:***  
***I never saw it that way before.***





## ***Thad Stem and Words***

He was in love with language,  
And being in love is different  
From the loving of words,  
Of making them dance and sing.  
Thad Stem could make words  
Stand up and cheer, turn somersaults,  
Walk a tight wire,  
Or wander through the woods and fields  
Like a creek.  
When writing a poem he would create  
Images different from anyone else,  
But even the words had to walk the line.  
He would declare, I want people to say  
That's the way it is, or maybe,  
If you are lucky, they will say:  
I never saw it that way before.

## *Guy Owen's Windshield Wiper*

He was telling about a trip  
With Guy Owen in Owen's car.  
It was a day bright with sunshine  
And we rode all the way  
From Raleigh to Chapel Hill  
With the windshield wiper going  
Full blast, Guy at the wheel  
So involved in what he was saying  
He didn't notice.  
I was new on the faculty, he said,  
And I was so caught up  
With that damn windshield wiper  
I can't remember a thing he said.  
Why didn't I tell him the wiper was on?  
I didn't dare, he said.

## *The Kudzu Man*

She called him the kudzu man,  
and there were similarities in the two.  
Kudzu comes on quietly,  
Giving its greenness to the gully-washed land,  
Covering the raw erosion, providing food  
For cattle, shade for a sun-washed porch.  
In its early days it is gentle,  
Caring and kind, but then--  
Before you know it, before you  
Are really aware it has taken over,  
Covered everything, swallowed up  
The land, the trees, telephone poles,  
And even the house.  
Kudzu is the overpowering king,  
It takes everything.  
He did, too.

## *Talmadge*

I have not written a birthday poem  
For you before, but I have thought of many,  
So many running together  
In memories of sun and sea,  
Blue moon and blue skies,  
Summer nights and the fragrance of flowers,  
Journeys together, quiet times, your laughter,  
The way you walk, the way you talk,  
The light in your eyes,  
And the pure sounds of a flute--  
I carry them all with me  
In a memory of you and your face,  
I write now on your birthday,  
Remembering.  
I write of love--  
    And wonder.

## *The Depression*

The depression hit them hard.  
George was the first to feel it--  
He lost his crop, then his farm,  
And the bank came and took  
Everything he had left.  
He started going from farm to farm,  
Looking into smokehouses,  
Into flour barrels, going away  
Shaking his head, saying  
"Can't last much longer."  
He came out of his own depression  
In a couple of years, but didn't  
Try to buy another farm.  
He started laughing again,  
Laughing a lot, laughing hardest  
When he saw a banker.

## ***The Patriot***

He refused to take off his hat  
When the flag went by.  
People were pointing at him,  
Calling him ugly names.  
They yelled for the sheriff to  
    arrest him,  
But when the sheriff put his hand  
On his arm he shook it off,  
And turned to face the crowd.  
"I am an American," he said,  
"And an American doesn't take  
    his hat off  
To anything or anybody."

## ***For Margaret***

We have shared many things,  
Spoken and unspoken,  
And memory races over the years  
Through the seasons  
Of golden falls, flowering springs,  
All the green and growing times,  
Remembering your laughter,  
Your independence, your caring,  
Reaching out to others.  
I think of you being there  
For family and friends.  
It was a long time ago,  
I wanted to tell you  
That you looked like Ava,  
But you were better looking.  
Now across the years,  
Across the long remembering,  
I send greetings and wishes  
For the best always.

## ***Policy***

There was this interview on television--  
A nationwide network--and  
The Editor was asked,  
What is your editorial policy? And  
The Editor said, 'I have never  
Thought about having a policy,  
But I thought if I stood  
On the side of humanity  
I wouldn't go wrong. '



## ***The Pocketbook Hater***

Her tone was of the boardroom,  
And the high circles  
In which she moved.  
"I'm not much of a feminist," she said.  
"And I was never much involved  
    with the movement."  
She shook her head--  
"But I really don't care for that law  
Which says if you don't have a dick  
You have to carry a pocketbook.  
I hate pocketbooks."

## *Salute to St. Andrews*

The time, a place, a people--  
The ingredients for a human experience,  
A vision shared and growing,  
Even before a young woman  
Danced the Highland Fling  
In the bright sunshine  
Of an Open Field in Scotland County  
There was a melding out of the mists  
Of time at a place  
Where the voices of people were heard.

Have you felt it yet?  
Yes, it is something to feel.  
You can see the grass, the trees,  
All the green and growing things,  
And you can hear the voices,  
Taste the sweetness of the air,  
But you have to feel it--  
The glow in the eyes,  
The quickened step, the inner sounds  
That take hold, and you know  
It is the time,  
It is the place,  
And the people await,  
Marching onward, always onward.

## ***About the Author***

**Sam Ragan**, Poet Laureate of North Carolina, was born at Berea in Granville County, North Carolina, and is a graduate of Atlantic Christian College. He has been awarded doctorate degrees by Atlantic Christian, Methodist, and St. Andrews Colleges, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ragan served as the first Secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, and was one of the founders and a trustee of the NC School of the Arts. A former chairman of the NC Arts Council, a member of the NC Humanities Council and the Library Resources Committee, Ragan has served on the faculties of NC State University, St. Andrews College, and Sandhills Community College as a teacher of journalism and creative writing. He is the recipient of the North Carolina Award, the Morrison and Parker Awards, the DAR Medal of Honor, and others for contributions and achievements in literature and the fine arts. He is the author of four award-winning collections of poetry, editor of *Weymouth*, an anthology of North Carolina poets and several works of nonfiction, including *Free Press and Fair Trial*.

Ragan has lectured extensively around the country on press and free speech freedoms and literary subjects. As a journalist and editor for more than fifty years, he has a nation-wide reputation and has served as president of state and national press organizations. He was for twenty years the executive editor of the *News and Observer* in Raleigh, and for the past twenty-five years has been editor and publisher of *The Pilot* in Southern Pines, NC, where he lives with his wife, of more than fifty years, Marjorie Usher Ragan. They have two children, Nancy and Talmadge, and two grandchildren, Robin and Eric Smith.





**\$10.00**



*"No voice has been stronger or perhaps  
more persuasive than Sam Ragan's."*

**--Paul Green,  
Playwright and Philosopher**

*"This is poetry sensitive to the seasons  
of life, the sureties and contradictions  
of living, the elements in which we exist.  
And it could only have been written out  
of a Tar Heel's sense of place."*

**--Tom Wicker,  
Associate Editor, *The New York Times***

*"Anyone who knows southern writing, and  
especially the literature of North Carolina,  
knows how much we owe Sam Ragan. It is  
fine to think how a quiet nature has made  
such a big difference."*

**--Fred Chappell,  
Poet, Novelist, Teacher, Critic**

**ISBN: 1-879934-46-9**

**ST. ANDREWS**  
COLLEGE  
press